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**For a Working-Class Dream, a New Day**

**By CHRISTOPHER JOHN FARAH**

WHEN the Neo-Tudor garden apartments of the Amalgamated Cooperative Houses were built in 1926, the courtyards were so full of trees and flowers it was difficult to tell where the development ended and Van Cortlandt Park, just to the north, began. Many new residents were recent immigrants, members of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, who were fleeing the squalor of the Lower East Side. To them, their new home in the north Bronx looked like Shangri-La.

One of the first people to move in was Sylvia Lutzin, a 9-year-old with a fetching Buster Brown bob, who arrived with her family on Oct. 31, 1927, the day before the doors officially opened. Sylvia was promptly enrolled in the cooperative's youth league, where adult residents taught her about socialism. She also attended its dance and drama classes. There were activities for older cooperators (co-op lingo for residents), too: the Sunday Painters' Club; the library, which Sylvia's parents founded; and the chorus, where the adults sang songs about social equality.

It could be a wonderful world

If each little kid could have fresh milk each day.

If each working man had enough time for play.

If each homeless soul had a good place to stay.

Sylvia Lutzin is now Sylvia Anderson, 84 years old. She still lives at the Amalgamated, the place where she married and raised two daughters. Over the years, as her lustrous brown hair faded into gray, and light blue veins became visible on her pale skin, she watched the Amalgamated community grow from an initial 303 households to almost 1,500, with a three-year waiting list. Clusters of the original garden apartments were torn down to make room for high-rises that provided for greater density.

But even with this growth, and with the Amalgamated in the midst of its 75th anniversary, the project is delicately poised between past and present. At this, the country's oldest nonprofit housing cooperative, a younger generation of families is beginning to supplant the founding generation of Jewish progressives like Mrs. Anderson. Many of the new arrivals are blacks, Latinos and Asians who have no direct link with the co-op's proud tradition but were attracted by spacious apartments renting for as little as $500 a room.

Typically, when communities change, old-timers leave as newcomers arrive. And in fact, many of Mrs. Anderson's contemporaries have died or moved. But to a marked extent, the old and new here overlap and jostle one another. They live next door to each other, attend building meetings together, even take classes together.

Now, instead of the sounds of Yiddish or socialist songs, a new sound reverberates through the halls each week: ''Ohhhhhmmmmm.''

The yoga class is one of the most conspicuous signs of changing times at the Amalgamated. ''Let the stillness pervade your whole body,'' said Gertrude Bacon, the instructor, at a recent Tuesday night gathering. ''Make an intention to be fully present in this session. Present in body, present in mind, present in emotion, aware of this earth.''

''Ohhhhhmmmmm,'' intoned the class of eight students who sat -- legs folded, arms outstretched and palms up -- in the community center. ''Ohhhhhmmmmm.''   
  
In Seach of Utopia

When the leaders of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union founded the cooperative, they presumably did not foresee courses in Eastern methods of meditation. Their goal was to create a community that represented universal humanistic values.

The union, led by a Russian immigrant, Sidney Hillman, was one of New York's strongest, and the project was one of the city's most desirable. The monthly maintenance fee was fixed at $11 a room -- 20 to 40 percent less than what comparable private housing would have cost.

''In the tenements, people were living in bedrooms that had a window looking out onto a three-foot air shaft,'' said Andrew Hazelton, a producer of a documentary to be called ''Living in the Coops,'' about the cooperative movement that once flourished in the borough. ''Moving to that part of the Bronx was like moving to the country. You could still find working farms in the area. They weren't uprooting trees to put in streets; they were going over cornfields.''

Like two other similar developments in the northern Bronx dating from that era, the United Workers Cooperative Colony, or simply, ''the Allerton Coops,'' and the Sholem Aleichem Cooperative, they ascribed to the belief that art, music and theater were instruments of empowerment. The cooperatives are the subject of ''Three Bronx Utopias,'' an exhibition through July at the Judaica Museum at the Hebrew Home for the Aged in Riverdale, the Bronx.

''They saw enlightening the workers as an integral part of their mission,'' said Daniel Soyer, a history professor at Fordham University whose specialty is Jewish socialist and labor movements. ''They were making the workers aware of the best of humanity, trying to give them more tools to understand their world and act on their world.''

This mission inspired the Amalgamated's residents, among them the architect Daniel Libeskind, whose plan was selected for revitalizing the site of the World Trade Center. A Polish immigrant, Mr. Libeskind moved to New York with his family when he was 13 and spent his teens at the Amalgamated. Today, at age 57, he credits his upbringing in the secular Jewish, socialist environs with helping define his work.

''I remember the steps of these old houses that were later torn down,'' said Mr. Libeskind, who now lives in Berlin but is moving to New York. ''It's such a little thing. But sitting on the stairs was such a wonderful way to shape my childhood, because I would talk to people and learn all their stories.

''It wasn't just the architecture, which was very simple, but thoughtful,'' he added. ''It was also an ethical idea. We formed a community in the real American sense.''

Unlike Sholem Aleichem, which was strictly socialist, and the Coops, which were communist (a hammer and sickle was carved into the stone arches of its entrance), the Amalgamated professed no single ideology. But a third of its residents worked in the garment industry, and the overwhelming majority were Jewish with socialist leanings.

The Great Depression brought an end to the heyday of the Bronx cooperatives, and ultimately, Sholem Aleichem and the Coops went under. But the Amalgamated survived, in part because while it continued to promote communal values, it refused to allow politics to undermine its financial solvency.   
  
Old Guard, New Guard

For the Amalgamated's first 30 years, its population was fed by a steady stream of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Gradually, beginning in the 1960's, the makeup of the Amalgamated's community started to change.

Today, the cooperative provides housing for close to 1,500 families. Ed Yaker, president of the Amalgamated Housing Corporation, estimated that about half of them are not Jewish, and a majority of those who are Jewish are elderly. Now, more families are headed by a single parent. While the Amalgamated was meant to be open to everyone, regardless of ideology, many original residents complain that the newest inhabitants are looking only for cheap, stabilized rent and don't care about culture the way the founders did.

''People aren't coming in with political values,'' Mr. Yaker said. ''We have good people coming in, but hey, they just want a good home to live in. And it's not the center of their life anymore.''

Etta Goldbaum represents the old guard. She and her husband, Al, moved to the Amalgamated in 1949 -- she had heard about the place through her job as an organizer with the union -- and the couple quickly became involved in the community, attending classes in folk dancing and the visual arts and organizing lectures and political discussions. In true cooperative fashion, Mrs. Goldbaum's co-op neighbor, Honey Kassoy, an artist, taught her batiking.

Like many of the earliest cooperators, Mrs. Goldbaum is elderly and ailing. She suffers from emphysema, and often attends community functions pulling a small cart bearing a green oxygen tank behind her.

Yet she and the rest of the senior population of the Amalgamated remain most involved in the co-op's cultural life. They attend the lectures on history. They populate the book club and the knitting circle. They organized the writing workshop and published pamphlets of each others' work, among them stories and poems about love, politics -- the majority remain deeply liberal -- and World War II memories.

At a party last Nov. 1, the 75th anniversary of the co-op's opening date, nearly all of the guests were silver-haired.

''I don't see any of them here, and they won't be here later,'' said Honey Kassoy's husband, Bernard, alluding to the younger residents. ''They're busy making a living. Of course, so were we, but we still found the time. When our generation is gone, the whole thing will change.''

Age and sickness have already made inroads. The writing workshop, for example, has not met for a year, ever since its founder became too ill to schedule meetings.

Doris Spencer, one of the few younger, non-Jewish residents who did attend the anniversary celebration, represents the transition taking place at the Amalgamated. Ms. Spencer, who is 49 and black, and the mother of two daughters, moved to the community in 1986. Since 1995, she has been the Amalgamated's education director, the person most responsible for making sure the cooperative maintains its sense of social mission. She helps organize the various community programs -- there are nearly a dozen -- and holds an orientation twice a year to help new cooperators understand the Amalgamated's philosophy. She can often be found striding down the co-op's hallways, hurrying from one meeting to the next.

''Our cooperators today are certainly very different from many years ago,'' she said. ''Today's families moving in don't necessarily have a strong sense of commitment to politics. But that isn't necessarily a bad thing. It's different.''

Ms. Spencer believes that the cooperative can maintain the feel of a close-knit neighborhood. Although she acknowledges that many Amalgamated functions would cease to exist if not for the seniors, she points out that newer programs are rising up that attract a younger crowd. The carpentry crafts course is full, with 20 people signed up, and more on the waiting list. Management just refurbished the ceramics studio, where a core of four people meets regularly to work on projects. Seventy-five years ago, Ms. Spencer noted, the cooperative didn't offer yoga or tai chi or have a gym.   
  
Bridging Two Different Worlds

Given the Amalgamated's increasingly diverse population, combined with its inclusive ideology, much effort is spent trying to build bridges between the community's two worlds. Results are mixed.

At a recent meeting in her building, Mrs. Goldbaum made a placard out of construction paper with the heading, ''We Are a United Nations.'' The sign listed more than 20 nations that people from the building called their original home, among them Mexico, Korea, Russia, Ireland and Thailand.

The co-op also established an annual International Food Night, when neighbors cook and serve ethnic dishes. The evening attracts both old people and young, and one 11-year-old resident helped serve food and drinks. The evening is her favorite event of the year, except for one thing.

''A lot of people in the community are old,'' she said, laughing. ''They're old and grumpy, and they complain a lot. If we would bring them anything, they would just complain: 'This water is too cold! This water is too cold!'''

There are other sources of tension beyond generational. Some middle-aged cooperators say the extensive elderly population stunts the Amalgamated's development. Many elderly residents whose spouses have died and whose children have moved out continue to live in large three-bedroom apartments that critics say would be perfect for new families. Activities like the lecture series take place during the day to appeal to older residents, making it impossible for younger working parents to attend.

At the same time, the older generation is spreading the communalist values of the past to the cooperators of the future. Earlier this year, Dominick Cohen, a 73-year-old retiree, directed a production of the play ''Night Watch'' that attracted 60 to 70 people for each of eight shows in Vladeck Hall, the co-op auditorium. The audience was diverse and so was the cast, which included a Jewish teenager and a black woman in starring roles. It was the theater group's first show in three years.

Cross-fertilization goes both ways. Joseph Ruiz, a 45-year-old graphic artist who moved into the co-op with his wife and daughter eight years ago, helped refurbish and repaint one of the common studios so younger students could use it. He would like to work on his own projects -- he paints in acrylics -- but he lacks the time.

''Now you have two-parent or one-parent families,'' Mr. Ruiz said. ''You get home at 6 or 7, and the last thing you have on your mind is some community event. You want to lie down and go to sleep.''

While much separates the older and younger generations, they have much in common. Both started families with limited financial resources, often with both parents working at blue- or white-collar jobs. And both are open to the satisfaction of communal living.

Millie Dominguez, who has been living at the Amalgamated for more than two years, paid less rent at her last Bronx apartment. But as a single mother, she is glad that her daughter is growing up in a strong community environment.

''It's got a family atmosphere, that true cooperative atmosphere,'' she said. ''You see the continuation from generation to generation, and the fact that there are a lot of friendly old-timers is telling about the quality of the neighborhood.''

Eduardo Hernandez is attracted by the co-op's practical conveniences. His rent is double what he paid for his last apartment, but features like the yoga class and the gym, where he lifts weights and does aerobic exercises four times a week, help compensate for the price difference. Mr. Hernandez understands why some older cooperators complain that members of his generation are not involved enough in the community, but he thinks the Amalgamated has to adapt.

''People aren't of that mind-set now,'' he said. ''Social justice, communal living, communication -- that just isn't around anymore.''

At the end of Tuesday's yoga class, Ms. Bacon prepared her students for the final silent meditation. Everyone lay on their backs, closed their eyes and stretched out their arms and legs. Some covered themselves with jackets to keep warm. This position, Ms. Bacon told them, was called the ''corpse pose.'' ''Now, we begin to relax, clear our minds,'' she said. ''We learn to let go of what we cannot control.''

**Correction:** May 11, 2003, Sunday A front-page article last Sunday about the changing population of the 75-year-old Amalgamated Cooperative Houses in the Bronx misstated the typical monthly rent. It is about $500 for a one-bedroom apartment, not ''as little as $500 a room.''